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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PAPAL NUNCIO GLOOMY ABOUT CHRISTIAN
POLITICS

BEIRUT 00001574 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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SUMMARY

11. (C) The Papal Nuncio in Lebanon exhibited a general disdain for Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, the Maronite Christians, and the greater Lebanese Christian community regarding their disorganized, ineffective role in Lebanese politics today, calling the Maronite church a "grande folie." He stressed that the Vatican's policy on Lebanon strives to preserve the multi-confessional, democratic identity of Lebanon. On the impasse over a new president, he felt the solution rested with the three Generals -- outgoing president Emile Lahoud, current armed forces commander Michel Sleiman, and Michel Aoun. Possible scenarios would entail either a constitutional amendment (Sleiman), a two-year presidency, or a transitional government, postponing a resolution to the underlying political crisis. End summary

"NOT THE END OF THE
WORLD IF NO ELECTIONS"

12. (C) The Ambassador and PolOff met with Papal Nuncio to Lebanon Monsignor Luigi Gatti October 5. The Lebanese presidency topped the agenda, and Gatti said, "It is not the end of the world if there are no elections." He said the three generals, Emile Lahoud, Michel Sleiman, and Michel Aoun, are critically important in determining the outcome of the presidential impasse. (Note: Gatti, who met earlier that day with with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, reported that Aoun has realized he will not be the next president. That is not the impression many other visitors to Aoun have relayed to us. End note.) Gatti cited three possible options. One is to elect Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) commander Sleiman, with a constitutional amendment. Another is to have a two year presidency. A third option is to have a two-year transitional government until conditions are more conducive to selecting a president. (Note: Gatti did not specify whether the presidency would be vacant under the last scenario, although that is the implication of his comment. End note.) Gatti asserted, "Compromise is negative, consensus is positive."

DISDAIN FOR THE CLERGY

13. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's inquiry about the influence of the Patriarch, a frustrated Gatti merely formed a zero with his hands. He added that the next level of clergy under the Patriarch are of equal non-value, saying, "They are nothing." He explained that the bishops today are mediocre, and then when one dies, they replace him with a more mediocre bishop so as to avoid competition among themselves. His criticisms of the clergy were numerous, saying the bishops act like politicians and the church's finances were disastrous; in essence, the Maronite church is a "grande folie." Gatti also cited the lack of unity within the Christian faith, arguing that the Patriarch should focus on more than the Maronite community, since the Greek Orthodox, for example, are also part of Lebanon's Christians. Lebanon's Christians would have more influence if they would work together, starting with the notoriously divided Maronites.

PRESERVING THE LEBANESE IDENTITY

14. (C) Gatti explained that the Vatican's policy is to preserve the Lebanese identity of multi-confessionalism, multi-culturalism, and democracy, specifically noting the institution of the president, which is traditionally held by a Maronite. But, he lamented, the Vatican seems to have a clearer vision about the preciousness of the Lebanese identity than the Lebanese themselves do. First, he said, the Lebanese thinks of himself, then of his family, then of his tribe, then of his confessional community, and then maybe as a last resort of his country. By contrast, the Vatican aims to preserve the spirit of the Lebanese national identity, as reflected in the positive values of democracy and diversity.

BEIRUT 00001574 002.2 OF 002

SPECULATING ON HIZBALLAH

15. (C) Noting that a Lebanese bishop recently met with Hizballah, he said Hizballah is rearming, but not solely for the purpose of resistance against Israel. Returning to the problems of the Christian community plaguing Lebanon, he speculated that there probably will not be a Sunni-Shia conflict, but instead a Christian-Christian flare.

COMMENT

16. (C) Monsignor Gatti permitted no flash of optimism to brighten his unrelentingly bleak description of Lebanon's Christendom and his pessimism about presidential elections. We do not disagree with his basic criticisms of the Maronite Patriarch and Church: Patriarch Sfeir has too often equivocated when he should have been decisive, and he still looks at the Maronites from an outdated, narrow perspective, rather than trying to unite all of Lebanon's Christians. But, while we share his frustration, we do not understand Gatti's passivity. He could play a powerful role here. Instead, he describes the Maronites with the tone of academic reserve (or even disdain), as if he were an anthropologist examining a particularly exotic, and not very appealing, species. As the Papal Nuncio, Gatti could be much more forceful in persuading the Patriarch to exercise a leadership role.

17. (C) One very tangible suggestion, for example, would be for Gatti to encourage the Patriarch to stop receiving visitors who disregard the requests of the Church. The Maronite bishops, in their monthly statement, called for the removal of the sit-in that has crippled downtown Beirut economically for ten months. The bishops, in their annual statement, called on all Christian MPs to attend the

parliamentary election session. Michel Aoun rejected both appeals, yet the Patriarch continues to receive Aoun delegations on a daily basis. Perhaps Gatti could help the Patriarch understand that, if he showed that there were consequences for ignoring Patriarchal advice, the Patriarch could then have the influence he fears he lacks. In Gatti's defense, he has been in Lebanon for six years. He may simply at this point have given up trying to improve what sounds to be a most dysfunctional religious hierarchy. But Gatti leaves an unfortunate vacuum where the important Vatican role should be in Lebanese politics today.

FELTMAN